DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 460 282 CE 082 648

AUTHOR	Haig-Brown, Celia
TITLE	Taking Down the Walls: Communities and Educational Research in Canada's 21st Century. NALL Working Paper.
INSTITUTION	Ontario Inst. for Studies in Education, Toronto. New Approaches to Lifelong Learning.
SPONS AGENCY	Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, Ottawa (Ontario).
REPORT NO	NALL-WP-17-2000
PUB DATE	2000-09-23
NOTE	10p.; Dr. Reginald B. Moase Invitational Address presented at the Annual Brock University Graduate Student Conference (19th, St. Catherines, Ontario, Canada, September 23, 2000).
AVAILABLE FROM	For full text: http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/depts/sese/csew/nall/res/17takingdown .htm.
PUB TYPE	Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Adult Education; *Canada Natives; *Chippewa (Tribe); Colleges; Cultural Activities; *Cultural Education; Cultural Maintenance; Culturally Relevant Education; Demonstration Programs; Developed Nations; Discourse Communities; *Educational Research; Educational Researchers; Epistemology; Field Studies; Foreign Countries; Indigenous Populations; Informal Education; Instruction; Nonformal Education; *School Community Relationship; Theory Practice Relationship; *Tribally Controlled Education
IDENTIFIERS	Canada

ABSTRACT

To take community seriously in the conduct of educational research, the researcher should consider taking down epistemological walls and the "real" ones that confine the processes and products of academic labor to artificially isolated settings. Epistemologically, the question of walls relates to the kinds of knowledge competed over, most often disciplinary knowledge. Within and around disciplinary walls are the walls of theory. Community in the context of the discussion means the creation of spaces that allow difference to be a constant, unpredictable part of who we are together. A pilot project, A Pedagogy of the Land (POL), is an example of current research in an attempt to take down the walls. POL involves traditional indigenous knowledge keepers with some fluency in their language whose knowledge arises from traditional Anishinaape world view in a program that allows them to build on one another's knowledge and prepare to pass it on to others who know less. POL addresses walls by taking the university a faculty member out of the walls of the campus. It begins from the premise that traditional knowledge has most often been pushed outside the epistemological walls of academe by being given inequitable status and prestige. What happens on the island in the north where POL is located is discourse that has been inaccessible to the English language, arises from the land, and is constructed by the people who have lived there since time immemorial. (Contains 13 references.) (YLB)

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ED 460 282

NALL Working Paper # 17-2000

Taking down the walls: Communities and educational research in Canada's 21st Century*

The Dr. Reginald B. Moase Invitational Address
delivered to the
19th Annual Graduate Student Conference
Faculty of Education
Brock University
St. Catharines, Ontario
September 23, 2000

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by

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* I am grateful in ways beyond words to my research partner, Kaaren Dannenmann, who discussed many nuances of this paper with me as she reviewed it and worked with me to reword and revise it.

Taking down the walls: Communities and educational research in Canada's 21st Century

INTRODUCTION

Aaniin and miikwech for inviting me here to speak with you today. These are two of the words I have learned from the Anishinaape teachers and students with whom I have had the privilege of working during the last four years since I have come to live in this territory. I want to begin by acknowledging that we are meeting today on land which has been used and occupied by aboriginal peoples since time immemorial, long before any European explorer or missionary laid the ground work for colonization, a legacy we have inherited and a context in which we continue to work. This is the traditional territory of the Anishinaape, more recently joined by the Six Nations. It is a land which was and is integral to the lives of many Aboriginal peoples in their relations with the riches it continues to give. Although less frequently acknowledged in this way, this same land has become integral to the lives of many non-Aboriginal people in their relations with these riches.

I want also to acknowledge the memory of Dr. Reginald B. Moase whose life's work is honoured by this annual invited lecture. It is a privilege for me to have been invited to speak to the inheritors of his community of learners and teachers.

I am very conscious of the fact that I am speaking today to students who are beginning and continuing their graduate work and to faculty -- and some students -- with many years of experience in community research. I will try be all things to all of you and hope that this effort does not reduce me to saying not

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much of anything at all. I want to lay out some thoughts with which I am struggling and an opportunity for you to take them up with me here and in the places where you will begin or continue your research. I acknowledge that underlying all that I say is an overwhelming concern about the responsibility that comes with the privilege we have in working within the university. The time to think through issues and to engage in scholarly labour is something that only a small percentage of Canadians ever experience. I want first to tell you a story and then make problematic some notions of community and walls.

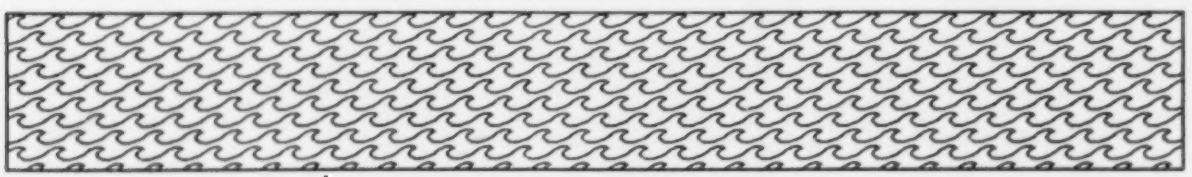
THE CONTEXT OF THE STORY[1]

Let me begin a challenge to the constraints of the walls of academe and to what counts as university knowledge through reference to a story. This is a story which I heard most recently from two of my Anishinaape teachers, Alan Corbiere of M'chigiing (who was co-incidentally a masters student whose work I supervised) and Kaaren Dannenmann of Namekosipiink, my research partner in a SSHRC funded project we call A Pedagogy of the Land.[2] It is a story that in itself and its presentation here strives to take down an epistemological wall and which originates in a place that was here long before the material walls of this building were constructed.

I tell this story to you as a white woman who is becoming familiar with some of the stories and traditions of the land on which and with which we live. My intent is not to appropriate aboriginal knowledge but to share with you some things I have learned. My telling may be dangerous and harmful if you do not appreciate that this is an Anishinaape story which loses much in translation. It loses the nuances that the original language brings to it as it is moved to English and as it is presented from my limited understanding and ability to pass it on. I tell you the story in English because it is all I know and in this context, it is all that we have to work with. Most important this is a story to be spoken: this is how it became real to me. In the written version of this talk, it will appear in my text as space, as an absence, in respect for its power and for orality.[3] I refer the reader to two textual versions written or told by elders.[4] This is a story of a time before there was land and the exhaustion of the animals who had all been swimming for a long time. It is the story of the Turtle's offer, Beaver's and Otter's failures, and Muskrat's life sacrifice. Although he drowned in his efforts, in his tiny hands, Muskrat clasped the dirt which became the land with which we live today.

This moment has the possibility to be a place where one instance of community based research is honoured within the university. This story does not start at the beginning because that's not how it was told to me. In some versions, it is a story of Turtle Island which I am sure many of you know is one of the names given to this place where we now live. Although many from European background have made this mistake, this story is not a children's story. It is a story for all of us to hear and make sense of in our own way and in our own location.

The Story of Muskrat's Sacrifice



Traditionally (or should I say conventionally) a story such as this one is told so that you can take it into your own context — cultural, community or personal — and make sense of it in ways that work for you. In the context of this scholarly talk, I am going to explain some of why I have used it today to exemplify my thoughts on community based research. It serves both as an exemplar of the kinds of knowledge we rarely take seriously in academe and, in one interpretation, as a direction to those who take community as seriously as Muskrat did. And it asks, as we are doing in the research project Pedagogy of the Land, how does a university make sense of that which cannot be written. In its absence from the written text for this talk, it insists on respecting a form of knowledge which exists outside of and exceeds writing.

TAKING DOWN THE WALLS

Why "taking down the walls" you might ask? Which walls? If we take community seriously in our conduct of educational research, we will consider taking down epistemological walls as well as the "real" ones which confine the processes and products of academic labour to artificially isolated settings. Epistemologically, the question of walls relates to the kinds of knowledge we compete over and privilege in the university. Most often these are the disciplinary knowledges we all take for granted and with which we, in the relatively fledgling field of educational research, often strive to align ourselves -- philosophy, history, physics -- the sciences generally. Of course, what I am proposing is not a new idea: interdisciplinarity, post-structuralism, postmodernism are all manifestations of a lack of satisfaction with the organization of knowledge into discrete categories which inhibit alternative ways of thinking about the world. Even the desire to shift what counts as knowledge within these categories remains contested territory. Witness a recent series in the Globe and Mail on The Death of History: actually a representation of the on-going struggle between those who see history as a single unifying story of battles and bravery and those who strive to make sense of the stories of the crowds of other people who make up our country. On September 21, 2000, in an article entitled "The great war for our past", the author bemoans the shift in high school curricula from so-called traditional history to social history. Summarizing the concerns of a conservative historian, a reporter writes:

> Instead of learning about the soaring rhetoric, the passionate beliefs and the daring battles fought by our ancestors, Canadian students were being subjected to tedious sermons about parish politics, labour organizers and frustrated women who couldn't get into law school. (p. R1)

He goes on to say, "40% percent [of Grade 11 or 12 students studying history in Saskatchewan] have what conservatives would call the basic shared historical information necessary to being Canadian citizens. And the history they do study stresses the native peoples and the immigrant groups rather than the political and military leaders." Never mind that Canada is made up only of native peoples and immigrants: clearly there is a wall being violated in this reporter's view. The next day in an oped piece entitled "The death of history is bunk", Patrick Watson says delicately, " The assumption that naming events and memorizing dates make for good citizenship and a wise life. Garbage!" Clearly the battle over what counts as disciplinary knowledge continues. And the debates do not stop there: within and around disciplinary walls are the walls of theory.

If one orientation to knowledge -- or theory -- still predominates within academe, it is positivism. This approach is powerful and serves us well in many forms of research. However, as with any theory which goes unquestionned too long, it has gained an imperial presence particularly for those seeking funding for medical and scientific research. The approach, designed to discover or create universal laws of predictability, is loosely based in the format for high school science experiments using what has been called "the scientific method " which incidentally has little to do with the way that scientists actually conduct their most creative work. It consists of making a hypothesis, gathering the materials and equipment to be used, performing some action with those materials and equipment, making observations about what happens and then drawing conclusions about whether the hypothesis is true or false. In the method's most simple form, unrelated activity, no matter how exciting, is to be ignored. Such distractions from the predetermined agenda of the research are relegated to being sources of error. One of the main purposes of such work is to isolate the question from its context and focus on the specific aspect of the subject being investigated.

In recent curriculum developments in education, the focus on performance indicators and predictable learning outcomes exemplifies this approach to decontextualizing knowledge. Socio-historical context and children's life experiences are most often seen to be irrelevant to the question asked. Consider the standardised tests now being administered to children and soon perhaps to teachers. If a teacher applies a particular action using the curriculum equipment supplied, the results can be weighed and measured in the form of numbers of correct responses, and we can know if the desired learning has taken place. As a corollary we can decide if the teacher is doing her job properly. If students are not attaining high scores, we can conclude that the teacher is not working appropriately with the "equipment" supplied. We are not to be distracted by superfluous contextual details such as hunger, poverty, or family disruption or by

unpredictable outcomes: these are irrelevant to our work.

Within universities, we create other knowledge walls in our pursuit of educational research: some of us work in anti-racist education or curriculum or leadership or adult education. We create literatures and discourses which "fit" into the rooms we make. While these walls sometimes serve important functions in creating legitimacy for previously excluded knowledges or even maintaining the legitimacy of more established forms, when they are unquestioningly defended, they become dangerous to our abilities as scholars to imagine other ways and to take seriously what this particular theory cannot say. At times we move to an extreme of working to exclude from the discussion those who are not in "our field"and whose work might disrupt ours. We compete with them for research dollars and students' souls and are reluctant to speak with them wanting to avoid challenges to our existing commitments. It seems to me[5], like the animals in the story, within our enclosed community, we forget to honour difference: we know who the experts are and we look to those who accept that role: to Beaver and Otter for our direction. We rarely take the time or are quiet enough to recognize, hear, or take seriously the voice of Muskrat.

COMMUNITY

And what is community in the context of this discussion? The word conjures up notions of co-operation and sameness. Moving beyond definitions such as those from the OED where community includes "common character, quality in common; commonness, agreement, identity" and "a body of people organized into a political, municipal or social unity, " recent theorising complicates the notion. Eleanor Godway and Geraldine Finn claim that community is catechresis, calling on Gayatri Spivak's definition whereby "catechresis[6] means that there is no literal referent for a particular word; that its definition comes apart, as it were, as soon as we begin to articulate it" (2). Iris Marion Young makes explicit the oppressiveness that communities can create:

> Community is an understandable dream, expressing a desire for selves that are transparent to one another, relationships of mutual identification, social closeness, and comfort. The dream is understandable, but politically problematic because those that are motivated by it will tend to suppress differences among themselves or implicitly to exclude from their political groups, persons with whom they do not identify (1990: 300).

In looking historically at the effects of community building, Godway and Finn question the possibility of even trying to construct such a place:

> It is up to us to make community: to find it, build it, or encourage it to grow in our fragmented world. But can we? Or should we even try, when in spite of good intentions, the effects of community are often more divisive, more exclusive, and more oppressive, than the absence of community it originally intended to remedy or remove?(1994:1).

Despite such warnings or perhaps because of them, I am committed to trying. If we keep in mind the dangers of past efforts, perhaps we can do a better job of creating spaces which allow difference to be a constant, unpredictable part of who we are together. Striving to work respectfully with difference may broaden our work in ways that serve to enrich what I am coming to see as the limitations of centralized theorizing whether it is within disciplinary walls or university walls . Confining ourselves to particular and familiar theoretical or material contexts leads to impoverished and/or obscure theory based too often in work we do primarily with and for people just like us. Outside the university, taking community seriously addresses the other kinds of walls, the ones which we cannot wish away, the borders of our physical plant: it may mean getting out of our offices and libraries and into the schools and into the streets. Sometimes, it even means getting in a boat or onto a snowmobile. Ultimately, it means learning to listen just when we thought our positions in academe, whether as graduate students or faculty, gave us the credibility to speak and be listened to.

It also means constantly questioning the assumptions - the theories -- on which we are basing our work, taking seriously what Spivak calls a developed theory of ideology. This theory of ideology allows us to keep always in mind the limitations of the theories which guide us and the need to continuously question their relevance as time moves and spaces shift. Spivak quoting Marcherey writes: "...what the work

cannot say is important, because there the elaboration of the utterance is carried out, in a sort of journey to silence." (1988: p.286). In what ways do the theories with which we are working blind us to knowledge and silence us in the face of the unspeakable?

Let me be clear this kind of critical approach to community work is not for everyone. It is not for the faint-hearted. Working outside of one's institutional or against one's disciplinary setting in good ways is painstaking work which encompasses promise and unpredictable twists. Without a sincere openness, love and respect for the knowledges and the people with whom one is working, research outside the walls of a theory or of an ivory tower may merely perpetuate inequity and reinforce in study participants and readers the limited view of the academic as the lonely and out of touch expert on things that matter to few.

WORKING TO TAKE DOWN WALLS: WHAT DOES IT REALLY LOOK LIKE?

Let me talk with you about an example of research I am currently conducting which is an attempt to take seriously the ideas about which I have been speaking. This is not to claim that I am succeeding in taking down walls, but it is to show you what trying can look like. As I have mentioned I am working with Kaaren Dannenmann, an Anishinaape trapper and teacher in a community in Northern Ontario. Although the intial plan for a programme for indigenous harvesters which Kaaren brought to York in the Fall of 1996, called for the students to come to campus, we re-designed the courses so that they were offered on the traditional land where Kaaren's ancestors lived. Although the land is not part of a reserve, it has been continuously occupied by members of her mother's family for countless generations. We have come to call our work together A Pedagogy of the Land. This project requires that we take seriously knowledge which cannot be written into a restrictive curriculum document (no matter what the wishes of the College of Teachers) and, for me as researcher, the construction of text and theory around strategic silences and necessary absence. It also requires that we take seriously the significance of particular land to the structuring of the curriculum and the research related to it.

The Pedagogy of the Land is a pilot project which involves traditional indigenous knowledge keepers who have some fluency in their language and whose knowledge arises from traditional Anishinaape world view in a programme that allows them to build on one another's knowledge and to prepare to pass it on to others who know less than they do. These other people may be children, other aboriginal people who have less knowledge and ultimately, in a move to building economic self-sufficiency, very carefully selected eco-tourists. The programme takes place on an isolated island in the middle of a large northern lake and is based in a curriculum of living together on this land over a period of two weeks. Its intent is to provide opportunity for the students — who are all also teachers for each other — to interact with one another using their everyday knowledge and to engage in a process of literally re-membering knowledges -- in the sense of piecing them back together -- that have been part of the lives of Anishinaape people since time began. Those designated specifically as teachers are Kaaren as the course director and one other person who is qualified to teach in schools in Ontario. As the teacher/student with students/teachers (Freire, 1977: 67) work and live together, they build on one another's remembrances and expertise, with memory stimulating memory in a dialectical process. The ultimate goal is not to get back to the mythical old days but to re-create indigenous knowledge in a contemporary context.

At times during the course, the students join together in sharing circles, what Graveline calls circle work (1998), to talk about the pedagogical implications of what they have been doing, to plan for the next steps of the course and to share thoughts and feelings about their work to that time. It is important to keep in mind that, for the last two or three centuries, the knowledge with which they are working has been systematically devalued by Eurocentric colonisers driven by a fervent commitment either to Christianity or to a market economy based in the industrial revolution or both. In the most intense attacks, the knowledge has been and, in some contexts continues to be, condemned as the devil's work. Thinking through these negative images -- even for those deeply committed to Anishinaape world view -- is heart rending and difficult work. There are no non-aboriginal people present for the courses. While I have been involved in the planning and conduct interviews with the people who have attended the program, I am not there for the courses themselves. In the second one offered this summer, Lori Moses who is a member of the Lenape nation and a doctoral student in English at York attended as a research assistant.

The program is designed so that over the period of a year, students attend two summer courses with an intervening teaching experience during the fall, winter and/or spring. The curriculum which must have endless flexibility is based on what people do as they live together in a place. So much for minute by minute lesson plans and predetermined performance indicators: one does not set a net if the wind is blowing too hard. As participants work through their days in traditional activities of gathering plants for foods and medicines, fishing and hunting, and building structures such as a sweat lodge, they incorporate sacred knowledge into their every action. While discussion of setting a net might be recorded in the research, the location of a medicinal plant or the conduct of a sacred ceremony is not grist for the research mill.

What the research to this time has focused on is documenting the process of planning and offering the courses -- with interviews forming the substance of the work. Again these interviews are carefully conducted and their use monitored by the research partners so that there is no danger of compromising the sacred traditional knowledge which is not to be documented in any way as part of this project. All research reports have been reviewed by the people involved -- in particular the partners and the teacher of the course in relation to her involvement and her evaluation of the project to date.

In what sense does the project address walls? Most obviously, it takes the university, in the body of a faculty member, out of the grey walls of the Keele campus. I recall one of my first trips to the island, sitting on the back of Kaaren's snowmobile thinking, "Hmm, Faculty of Education, I bet you never expected to find yourself here." Beyond the issue of material walls, this project begins from the premise that traditional knowledge has most often been pushed outside the epistemological walls of academe by being given inequitable status and prestige. This epistemic violence and consequent exclusion are real barriers to theory-building. A theory of ideology which Spivak calls for indicates that much current theorizing in its very foundations cannot break silence to address indigenous knowledges respectfully and thoughtfully — especially those which cannot be written or which suffer in translation. A now developed historic distrust for such theorizing also keeps aboriginal scholars very cautious in their connections with those institutions which have caused such turmoil and have treated them with such disrespect. Incorporating such knowledges first into certification programs and then into school curricula is for the most part beyond the capacity of our current scholarship especially as it translates into policy and action. Examples of epistemological adaptation which can encompass the strength of indigenous knowledges are few and far between and certainly beyond the reach of most non-aboriginal scholars at this time. We have too much still to learn beyond the walls. One of the goals of the work Kaaren and I are doing is to use the formal institution to strategize around the re-introduction of traditional/wholistic teaching/learning systems of the Anishinaape thus recognizing students' knowledge and providing needed credentials. While the ultimate goal may be a time when the university will no longer be needed and First Nations control will be a reality, for the time being, this institutional support is useful. Keeping in mind that formal education in the past has been part of the federal government's assimilation, "civilization" and genocide policies used against Aboriginal people, our aim is not to provide a socialization into dominant culture. One of my goals for the program is to redress the injustices dealt traditional knowers historically and currently in Canadian educational institutions through some form of reconciliation and recognisance and to re-create relationships between academics and traditional knowledge keepers. Perhaps there will come a time when such work will also allow some silences in current theorizing to be addressed.

ISSUES OF DISCOURSE

Ultimately our struggles have to do with world view and language. Through careful listening, we become privy to new forms of discourse. Here, I concur with Loomba that discourse is:

> ...a whole field or domain within which language is used in particular ways. This domain is rooted... in human practices, institutions and actions (1998: 39).

Serious discourse analysis never separates language from the context in which it is used. What happens on the island in the north is a use of language beyond the current understandings of most conventional theory. It is a discourse which has been inaccessible first to the English language and which, for the most part, suffers a lack of consideration in the colonizing theories which guide most of our work. Aboriginal scholars both within and outside the walls are speaking to us, non-aboriginal scholars, in

ways that can shift understandings and enrich all of our lives. What does this look like? How can we hear it? How can we learn to speak it? Joy Harjo and Gloria Bird write of re-inventing the enemy's language. Stimulated by the work of Maori scholar, Linda Tuhiwai Smith, I create courses which attempt to address what (de)colonizing our minds and our theory might look like. And I try to listen carefully to those voices who have not been welcomed and watch for those theories which are still not welcoming. To you, I suggest consideration of many forms of excluded knowledge from communities beyond the walls. My graduate students show me the way: what does it mean to take seriously the words of ten year old boys with learning disabilities asks Amy Popowich; of women of Chinese ancestry negotiating a Canadian graduate school asks Cheryle Tai; of Aboriginal children with autism and the white professionals working with them asks Mona Jones; of Sri Lankan graduate students in government sponsored graduate program, asks Jordan Haberman and the list goes on. What happens to university knowledge if we really listen and open our thoughts and our theories to the words of people not like us— whoever we are? Language as discourse does mediate our reality. It constructs our ways of talking about and ultimately constructing our worlds. As David Halperin has written:

> Constructions are very real. People live by them, after all — and now increasingly, they die from them. You can't get more real than that (1995: 45).

The words that teach me most these days come from that island in the north: sometimes I go there to hear them, sometimes they come to me in interviews or on e-mail. They form part of a discourse which arises form the land and is constructed by the people who have lived there since time immemorial. In conjunction with current theorising on decolonization, they provoke a way of thinking that challenges existing text and calls for me to find ways to work the two worlds, the two discourses, into respectful relation to one another.

I want to end where we began -- complete the circle for today -- by coming back to what Muskrat can teach us. How is that story -- that form of discourse -- relevant to our work as community researchers? I mentioned to you that my friend and research partner Kaaren is a trapper, didn't I? She tells me that when she traps Muskrat, the first thing she does, with meticulous care, is to cut off his/her hands and place them back in the water to show as she says, "that we remember the sacrifice and are grateful for and respectful of that gift." (E-mail communication, September 22, 2000). Every part of Muskrat is used and, finally the bones are returned to the waters where Muskrat lives.

This understanding can guide us in taking down the walls and moving into community research. Even as we researchers take from the people with whom we do our work, we can pause long enough to remember what the people have given us, find ways to show our gratitude and respect for what they have given us. One of these ways is to challenge our own theories and keep our minds open to the possibility presented by people too long outside the walls.

Notes

1. The teachings of Aboriginal peoples have been referred to as legends or myths while the teachings of European peoples are referred to as science. According to Kaaren, there is on-going discussion over the use of the term "Story" in relation to Aboriginal teachings. Some prefer to use the word "Teaching" in order to emphasize the sacredness of the interconnectedness and interrelations of all creation. Others, wanting to reclaim the power of the notion of story telling, see Anishinaape story as a form equivalent to other conventions such as the writing of a scientific report.

2. This project is part of New Approaches to Lifelong Learning, a large SSHRC network grant in adult education, headed by Dr. David Livingston of OISE/UT.

3. Writing as a "tool of forgetting"

> Lori Moses, the research assistant for the Pedagogy of the Land project described later in the paper, writes the following:

Learning by example, Kaaren Dannenmann said during the summer course, is an important aspect of traditional knowledge. She cited Daniel Quinn's discussion in My Ishmael of writing as a tool of forgetting. I myself experienced the perils of writing in a context of practical learning. To give one example: on the day we collected plant specimens by canoe, I wrote the names as we gathered them one by one. But the more I recorded the less attention I could pay to actual identification of the plants in their own habitat. Learning was constantly "postponed" to a time and place separate from the context.

4. In Basil Johnston's book Ojibway Heritage (1976:14), you can read one version of the story written from the perspective of an Anishinaape elder. Chief Thomas Fiddler, another elder, from Big Sandy Lake has a version of the story captured (and I use the word deliberately) in a collection called Legends from the Forest (Stevens 1985: 22).

5. Arlen Dumas (Cree) gave a talk entitled "'It seems to me': respect between Aboriginal People and the rest of Canada" at the recent Aboriginal Studies 2000 Symposium held at Queen's University. Kaaren pointed out that this qualifier was important to my claim.

6. Kaaren and I discussed the use of the word catechresis and in explaining to her why I like the word, I realised that it is its refusal of "thingness" or reification of that which is in motion that appeals to me. Catechresis, even as it is a noun, works to address the transience of notions such as community. As soon as we name it and define it -- or even try to do so -- it becomes somerthing else.

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